

SOMETHING FISHY ABOUT JONAH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

Everybody knows Jonah's story. Every child in church school has probably drawn a picture of him... him and the whale that swallowed him. Jonah, the obstinate prophet of God who is told to go to Nineveh, and deliver the city on God's displeasure announcing the imminent doom of the city and calling the people to repentance.

We all love this story because of its fanciful elements, even if we're not quite sure how literally to take it. It does stretch the imagination. A whale big enough to swallow a man? A perfect storm at sea and a hapless passenger in steerage thrown overboard to appease an angry God? Not something the crew of the QM2 would do!

Maybe we should rewind to the beginning of the story and fill in the gaps. Because we sometimes forget when we tell the kids about Jonah why it is that he is on that boat in the first place. The fact of the matter is that he is on the lam, trying to hide from God who has told him that he must go to that great city of Nineveh and cry out against it, warn them of impending doom, call them to repentance, or as my mother used to say, "Sit up and fly right!"

Jonah didn't like his assignment of preaching repentance to Nineveh, Israel's enemy; didn't like it at all. So he hopped the first freighter he could find to the opposite end of the world, to Tarshish.

Were Jonah six years old you might expect this kind of immaturity. You know, you ask your child to share her toys with another friend, and be nice, and the next thing you know the other kid is crying and wants to go home because your child won't let her play in her dollhouse.

Jonah had his reasons, so he balked at God's instructions and booked passage to Tarshish, a decision that didn't sit well with God.

Onboard ship God hurled a great wind on the sea and the ship began to roll and toss, the timbers creaking, the mainsail torn, the rudder useless in the waves. They must have been winds like last Wednesday's, winds strong enough to make your scarf blow into your face, your umbrella turn inside out, and give you the look of moon walking on your way to work.

Jonah told the crew that it was his disobedience that was the reason for the storm. So against their better judgment, the sailors decided to pitch him into the cold and briny deep.

Which is where the fish comes in, the one that God *provided* as the NRSV puts it; *ordained*, the King James explains, a whale *appointed* by God according to the storyteller, *appointed* to swallow the grumpy old prophet, and hold him for three days, there in the slime and smell of his innards (pardon my details).

Finally, after three days, the whale spewed out the distasteful prophet, and chucked him onto the dry land, which gave him another chance.

And that is what God did... gave Jonah another chance. Now a second time God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh, where the evil that was brewing there displeased God mightily. And this time Jonah had the wit to do what God asked him to do. He went to Nineveh, and he declared their peril and warned of the impending doom. He traveled all over the city, three days with his sandwich board and haggard look, a caricature of a Times Square prophet.

And an amazing thing happened. They listened. They paid attention. A preacher's dream fulfilled. They repented. In fact this is arguably the most successful prophetic mission recorded in the scriptures.

They closed the massage parlors, the back room bars, and shut down the drug cartels. They stopped the child abuse and ended the domestic violence, they provided shelters for the homeless and built affordable housing, they implemented health care for their elderly poor, a program you could actually understand. They put an end to arms production, they made peace with their neighbors and stopped torturing prisoners in clandestine locations, they stopped the terror squads that were taking people hostage, and in every respect cleaned up their act. The king and the cabinet in Nineveh led the whole thing. The king himself repented and ordered everyone to join him, to put on sackcloth and sit in ashes and pray for mercy. These were not even Jews, these Ninevites, but they believed that Jonah's God was calling them to repentance, nonetheless, and they repented, and turned their lives around.

And as if that weren't enough, so did God. God repented. That's the meaning of the word in Hebrew. God saw the sincerity of the Ninevites, the turn-about that they had made, and it moved God. Moved God so much that God repented of the idea of destroying them.

Now this is the point at which a lesser story might end with those familiar words, *and all lived happily ever after.*

But instead this story has one more chapter where we discover more about Jonah than we ever wanted to know. We find out why it was that he headed for Tarshish the first time when God had sent him to Nineveh.

And why was that? Because Jonah didn't like the Ninevites, couldn't stand the Ninevites, didn't want anything to do with the Ninevites at all, least of all to give them warning of God's displeasure, or any opportunity to avoid the well deserved judgment that was coming upon them. After all, they weren't even Jews, and what was the point of being a Jew if God does not love you more than God loves your enemies? If God is just, then God could not forgive the Ninevites, Jonah reasoned. Jonah thought he should defend God's honor and keep God from showing mercy on a nation that Jonah was sure God hated. After all, if Jonah hated the Ninevites, God must too.

Jonah puts it in his own words when he says to God, "I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." So Jonah hopped a ship for Tarshish because God was asking Jonah to do something that turned his stomach, show mercy to Israel's enemies.

Most of us are more like Jonah than we might be ready to admit. We have our systems worked out as to who is favored by God and who is not. We know the good guys from the bad guys. Just like Jonah.

So when God called Jonah's name and gave him a job to do, bearing a message of repentance to Nineveh, Jonah had more than a sneaking suspicion that if he did what God wanted, he wouldn't be able to stop God from doing the wrong thing... God being such a bleeding heart liberal and all, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." The very thought of it made Jonah want to run away and hide.

It's interesting that the other story we read today of Jesus' call to his first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John is so different from Jonah's story. These fishermen had no idea what Jesus was up to, or why they should follow him, but they did. They just dropped their nets and followed.

Most of us would like to think that if we heard God calling in some clear way, however that might be, that we would drop everything and follow. And Lord knows many have, quite notably. St. Augustine, prior to his conversion was a frat boy to the ⁿth degree, so much so that he became the patron saint of brewers. Sitting in a garden in Milan one day he heard the voices of children, where no children were, saying "Pick up and read." So he picked up his Bible and read St. Paul's words from Romans 13¹, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; living honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, ..." and it turned his life around. Not immediately mind you. He is, after all, also the author of the prayer, "Lord make me chaste, but not yet."

Dag Hammarskjold former Secretary General of the UN once wrote of his calling, "at some moment I, did answer Yes to Someone - or something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."²

We would like to imagine that *our* life like Augustine or Hammarskjold or Mother Theresa, or like Peter and Andrew and James and John could be one of faithful obedience easily accepted. But it is not always so. Sometimes God gives us hard things to do, *Jonah* things to do, missions and tasks that call out faith and courage from us, that fly in the face of what we think we are capable of doing, or that our peers might accept, whistle blowing that alienates others, or justice seeking that makes of us outsiders, or responsibilities that are hard to bear and break our heart. It is not unusual to want to run in some other direction when God calls our name and gives us something important to do, head for Tarshish, instead of Nineveh.

There is an old hymn of the church that's not in our hymnal any more. It's one of the best hymns ever written to my taste, a hymn about the call of the disciples. The verses sing,

They cast their nets in Galilee
Just off the hills of brown;
Such happy, simple fisherfolk,
Before the Lord came down.

Contented, peaceful fishermen,
Before they ever knew
The peace of God that filled their hearts
Brimful, and broke them too.

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
Homeless in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head down was crucified.

The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod.
Yet brothers [sisters] pray for but one thing –
The marvelous peace of God.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church proposed in 1755 an annual service of renewal of the covenant of Christian commitment to be observed at the beginning of each new year. By 1780 it became a part of the Methodist liturgy. Its central element is Wesley's covenant renewal prayer, which acknowledges that God has tasks for us to fulfill over which we have no control, and which we ourselves might not willingly choose. The prayer reads,

I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt, put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for Thee or laid aside for Thee, exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal.

It is an understanding of discipleship that is radical in its claim and accepting of the fact that whatever God has called us to be or to do is not necessarily ours to shape, but God's. What is ours is to get with the program, to be wise and faithful in getting on with doing what God is calling us to be and to do in life, even if what God has for us to do is hard to accept.

Some years ago a parishioner, a scientist, the head of a key research laboratory in this country, came to me with a dilemma. He headed a department dependent on federal contracts that were becoming more and more scarce at that time. Scarce enough that the only prospect he had of funding his department in the next fiscal cycle was to win a five-year deal to do research for the Army on how to enhance and preserve nerve gas. His question was, How could he in good conscience as a Christian develop such weapons? And how could he face his fellow scientists who depended on him for their livelihood if he did not seek that contract? God doesn't always give us something easy to do.

I think about any number of women I have known who have wrestled mightily with questions of education, income, and family. Graduates of the best of colleges, they feel the responsibility to use their education and not lay it aside. Yet they're torn because they believe that children need a parent at home. Add to that the cost of living and how much it helps to have two salaries coming in, and it's hard to know what is best. How you please God as well as do what is right for yourself and for your family. God doesn't always give us something easy to do.

I think about the conversations I have had from time to time with some of our most faithful members who are gay and lesbian and who describe to me their sense of loneliness in being the only church-going Christian in their circle of friends. Being a Christian is something they keep in the closet to a greater or lesser degree because it just stops conversation altogether, so many people have been hurt by the church in the past. Or it may be an area of tension in their relationship with their partner who is not a Christian. Straight or gay, married, partnered, or single it can be a serious spiritual disconnect if you feel you must hide your faith so as not to be discovered as a follower of Christ.

God doesn't always give us something easy to do. In fact some of the time, we may, like Jonah, want to run the other way when God shows us what our calling is.

I wonder what God is calling you to do in your life. What witness you are meant to bear, what work is yours, what challenges are about to unfold before you that may require courage and perseverance and faithfulness. One thing is for sure, from the story of Jonah. We cannot hide from God or run away from the hard things in our life. The psalmist of the 139th Psalm knew this when she acknowledged, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand uphold me." In other words, you can run, but you cannot hide from God. That is both the good news and the bad news of the gospel.

Fred Craddock former preaching professor at Emory University tells a story that I may have told before but that bears repeating in this context.

As a boy, Fred and his sister would play hide and seek. And he was a master at it. He had places to hide that she could never find. While his sister was counting to a hundred with her eyes covered, he would run and hide under the steps in front of the house, under the porch. And when his sister came looking she would get near to the steps and stand right beside him but never see him. Fred says it was all he could do to muffle his giggles there in the dark under the porch. He thought to himself, "She'll never find me here." "She'll never find me here." Until it dawned on him that, she'd *never* find him there.

So as soon as he could, when her back was turned, he would come out and yell and run to home base and jump up and down and make a lot of noise.

He did it he said, because he wanted what everybody here wants, maybe even the Jonah's among us, even those who are trying their best to hide from God and from life, which is not to be lost, but to be found.

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¹ Romans 13:12-14

² Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* 1961.